DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 705 EC 302 266

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TITLE Project ABLE: Academic Bridges to Learning Effectiveness.
INSTITUTION Longview Community Coll., Lee's Summit, Mo.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; College Programs; College Students; Community Colleges; *Developmental Studies Programs; *Head Injuries; *Learning Disabilities; Neurological Impairments; Program Effectiveness; Remedial Instruction; Social Support Groups; *Student Development; Student Educational Objectives; *Student Personnel Services; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Longview Community College MO

ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project ABLE (Academic Bridges to Learning Effectiveness), a program of the Longview Community College in Kansas City, Missouri, to provide college students with learning disabilities or brain injuries with the skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace. Each student in the program takes a basic core of classes covering personal awareness, assertiveness skills, college survival skills, study skills, and career education. Additional specially designed courses are available for help in basic reading, writing, mathematics, and keyboarding. Students may also be provided with special support services while attending general education classes. Project ABLE students also meet weekly with a support group (different groups for students with head injuries and learning disabilities) facilitated by a psychologist. A monthly support group is provided for family members. Program students pay a differential tuition fee to offset extra costs. Students remain in Project ABLE for an average of three semesters. Evaluation indicates that 71 percent of ABLE students continued to be enrolled in some educational or training program, with 31 percent in regular programs, and that program students develop in the direction of an internal locus of control, higher self esteem, and better critical thinking skills. Community support for the program has been demonstrated. (DB)

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PROJECT ABLE: ACADEMIC BRIDGES TO LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS

Mary Ellen Jenison

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Making the transition from high school to college presents challenges even under the best of circumstances. This process often creates defeating frustrations for individuals with learning disabilities or head injuries. Not only are these types of disabilities typically "invisible," but they also are diverse in nature. As a result, individuals with these disabilities must be fully aware of what accommodations are needed to circumvent the effects of their particular learning disability.

Unfortunately, one effect of having a learning disability is that of becoming passive in the educational process. After all, if one puts forth no effort, then failure is not quite as damaging to one's self-esteem. Further, a common characteristic of an individual who has survived head injury consists of the inability to recognize the effects of the injury. Clearly, either type of disability creates a great deal of emotional baggage and is not conducive to a student's making a trouble-free transition to either college or the workplace.

Longview Community College, one of the Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City, Missouri, from its inception in 1969, demonstrated a sensitivity toward students with disabilities. Developmental classes and tutorial services were put into place shortly after its inception, and soon after that a counselor for individuals with disabilities was hired. Individuals with learning disabilities, however, presented particular challenges. As recently as 1985, approximately fifteen students on campus had

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self-identified with learning disabilities. By 1990, that number had increased to seventy. Since learning disabilities are of such a diverse nature, the need for an intensive program to empower these individuals became evident.

Project ABLE (Academic Bridges to Learning Effectiveness) addresses these students' needs in a proactive way. Within a structured curriculum, ABLE students learn the skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace. Every student in the program takes a basic core of courses, consisting of guided studies classes to develop personal awareness, assertiveness skills, and college survival skills. These courses are taught interactively to encourage the active participation of the students in the learning process. In addition to the guided studies classes, a study skills class and a career course are included in the core curriculum.

Beyond this core of courses, each student's program is individualized. For example, Project ABLE offers specially designed courses for those who need them in basic reading, writing, mathematics and keyboarding. Each ABLE class has no more than twelve students which, again, encourages greater student participation. Sometimes students enroll in a combination of ABLE and regular college courses.

To further ease the transition of the ABLE student to the regular curriculum, Project ABLE reserves three to five seats in a number of general education courses. ABLE students enrolled in a tandem section attend class with the general college population, then attend study sessions held just for them twice a week. These sessions are facilitated by individuals who have completed the

particular course with superior grades. The students learn not only specific study skills, but also about the collaborative learning process. One ABLE student has facilitated the Psychology sessions for the past three semesters; another ABLE student has organized study groups in classes not attached to Project ABLE. Study sessions also are scheduled with the basic reading, writing and mathematics courses.

Every Project ABLE student also is scheduled to meet weekly with a support group facilitated by an experienced psychologist. Separate sessions are held for individuals with head injuries, as opposed to individuals with learning disabilities, since they often cope with different issues. For example, individuals with head injuries must cope with dramatic changes in themselves, whereas, individuals with learning disabilities often deal with lifelong frustrations. In order to strengthen peer relationships, the ABLE counselor organized a "peer helper" program, whereby experienced ABLE students volunteer to be mentors to students new to the program. The students also plan one major social activity, such as a picnic or a pizza party, every semester.

Important to the effective operation of this program is the coordination of efforts on the part of the Coordinator, counselor, instructors, clinicians and tutors. Weekly staff meetings covering recent literature on learning disabilities and head injuries provide maximum support for the students as well as provide a forum for sharing concerns and brainstorming effective techniques through a team approach.

The supportive team extends to the students' family members

and significant others. They are invited to attend a monthly evening support group where speakers from local agencies and the college address issues of interest.

This, through the structuring of curriculum and services, Project ABLE provides an environment in which individuals with disabilities feel safe and respected, thus fostering learning and growth of self-confidence. As the students gradually enroll in more regular classes, their instructors report seeing them as better prepared, interested in learning and confident enough to ask questions in class. The regular instructors, then, gradually are becoming more responsive to students with disabilities, strengthening the students' cycles of success.

Although the students themselves are the best advertisement for the program, strong outreach activities also have ensured steady participation and growth. To encourage enrollment in the program, relevant agencies, area high schools and colleges have been made aware of its existence. Letters about the program are sent to students who self-identify as learning disabled at the time of placement testing. In less than two years, Project ABLE's student population has more than quadrupled in number.

GOALS OF THE PROGRAM

The main objective of Project ABLE is to empower individuals with learning disabilities or head injuries with the skills needed to gain control of their own lives and learning, so that they can make a successful transition to regular college courses, vocational programs or the workplace. This major objective is comprised of several goals, including increased level of comfort in the college

setting, self-knowledge, knowledge of rights and appropriate accommodations, assertiveness and decision-making skills, remediated basic skills and higher self-esteem. Student success is measured through testing, retention rates, transition rates and case studies.

All basic skills courses in Project ABLE include the same concepts as regular basic skills courses. The instructors of these courses also teach in the regular program. They generally report that the ABLE students perform overall as well or better than students in the regular program. In fact, since the program's inception, 85 percent of all ABLE students have completed at least one semester with a grade-point average of 2.0 (on a 4.0 scale) or better. Sixty-six percent of the ABLE students have completed at least one semester with a grade-point average of 3.0 or better, and 20 percent with a 4.0 or better. An impressive 71 percent of all ABLE students who have completed at least one semester in the program currently are enrolled in an educational or training program; 31 percent have made the transition to regular educational or training programs. (Students remain in Project ABLE for a average of three semesters.)

Although the above data supports both the students' academic achievement and comfort level in the college setting, general research indicated that individuals with an internal locus-of-control, higher self-esteem, and adequate critical thinking skills have been found to be more successful in life's endeavors. (Rotta, 1966; Battle, 1980). Assessments of these traits are administered the day before ABLE students begin classes for the first time and

again during the week of final exams. The tests utilized are Correll Critical Thinking Tests (EMS, Millman, Tonkas, 1985), Culture Free Self-Esteem Inventory (Battle, 1981); and two Locus of Control Instruments (Rotter, 1966, Levenson, 1988). Post-test means have indicated a movement toward an internal locus-of-control, higher self-esteem, and better critical thinking skills.

Finally, since the program's inception, ABLE students have self-advocated for appropriate accommodations in courses taught by reluctant instructors, assertively advocated for more student parking, sought out assistance from campus resources outside the program, and even been awarded for positive behavioral changes at a summer camp program. A former ABLE student earned a certificate to be a Certified Nursing Assistant while she was attending the regular college program so that she could support her child and herself more comfortably.

These and many other success stories contribute to a feeling of satisfaction in terms of the effect Project ABLE has had on people with disabilities. Until 100 percent of our students succeed, however, we choose not to be completely satisfied. One component essential for the success of students with disabilities is knowledgeable, cooperative faculty. Unfortunately, no background in instructional techniques or learning theory is required for college-level faculty. In some cases, faculty members have degrees in education but scant knowledge of learning disabilities and head injuries. As a result, misunderstandings and less than optimal conditions exist in some of the classrooms.

Project ABLE is choosing to be proactive in addressing this

problem. An Advisory Board (comprised of professinals in the community) has been invited to meet in order to design a faculty in-service on instructing students with disabilities.

ABLE'S COST-EFFECTIVENESS AND REPLICABILITY

Project ABLE is a program that simply structures in particular courses and services already existent for community college students, but on a demand basis. Classes and study sessions are limited in size to no more than twelve students. The six ongoing support groups of up to ten students each are unique to the program.

To offset the expense of the program, Project ABLE students pay a differential tuition fee of $80 versus $41 per credit hour. Out-of-state students pay $121 per credit hour to compensate for the lack of Missouri state aid resources. Even with the differential tuition fee, ABLE is competitive with four-year colleges in terms of cost to the student.

The additional charges offset the costs of counseling, clinical staff, and smaller classes. The program is approved by Vocational Rehabilitation of Missouri, which pays the increased tuition amount for qualified individuals. Both the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the University of Kansas have placed graduate-level practicum students in the program. They have provided additional clinical assistance to the ABLE students.

Some of the costs of the program are offset further in that many ABLE students are from outside Longview's service area, and they tend to stay at the college to continue in the regular program.

Project ABLE was featured in a national newsletter and numerous letters and calls have been received from colleges and universities around the country interested in starting a similar program--a feasible possibility if a learning disabilities specialist is employed.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PROJECT ABLE

Project ABLE interfaces with professional organizations, agencies, schools, and family members of individuals with learning disabilities in the community. The Coordinator has participated in numerous projects, such as the planning of miniconference for the MO-KAN Council For Learning Disabilities and Division Of Learning Disabilities Conference for Missouri, and the organization of support group meetings for the parents and significant others of ABLE students. The Coordinator also presents regularly not only at professional conferences, but also at community meetings such as the Pilot Club. The Coordinator also serves as Treasurer of the MO-KAN Council for Learning Disabilities.

The community has responded to the reputation of Project ABLE. The Greater Kansas City Learning Disabilities Association has established an endowed scholarship fund for ABLE students and the State Learning Disabilities Association voted the Coordinator "1992 Learning Disabilities Professional of the Year" for the State of Missouri. Vocational Rehabilitation and rehabilitation agencies regularly refer clients to Project ABLE. In fact, two of the guided studies courses have been taught by Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors.

Project ABLE is guided by the aforementioned Advisory Board

consisting of professionals in the fields of learning disabilities and head injury, as well as business executives. Board members, many of whom represent community agencies, have given in-service training for instructors, clinicians, tutors, and parents of Project ABLE students. They also have been actively involved by making suggestions and referrals.

PROJECT ABLE - A NEW AND INNOVATIVE PROGRAM

The first Project ABLE classes began only two years ago with twelve students. Today the program serves fifty students. Students have moved to Longview's service area from the opposite side of the state in order to participate in Project ABLE. Others have paid out-of-state tuition and commuted past neighborhood community colleges to attend this program.

At this writing, Project ABLE is the only intensive support program in at least a two-state area that serves both students with learning disabilities and students with head injuries. Also, whereas most college programs of this nature focus on academics and one-to-one tutoring, Project ABLE includes social aspects and collaborative learning sessions. Its holistic approach is empowering future productive community members.

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